



July 9, 2002

Ms. Janice Mullenix  
Associate General Counsel  
Texas Department of Transportation  
125 East 11<sup>th</sup> Street  
Austin, Texas 78701-2483

OR2002-3693

Dear Ms. Mullenix:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 165464.

The Texas Department of Transportation (the "department") received a request for, among other things, information regarding inspection of traffic control systems relating to "the project of construction for the interchange facility consisting of the overpass on FM 1912 in Potter County, Texas, also known as Federal Project STP2000 (249) RGS." You inform us that the department will release certain responsive information to the requestor, but claim that the submitted traffic control device inspection reports are excepted from disclosure under section 552.111 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted representative sample of information.<sup>1</sup>

We begin by noting that the submitted information is made expressly public under section 552.022 of the Government Code. Section 552.022 provides, in relevant part:

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<sup>1</sup> We assume that the "representative sample" of records submitted to this office is truly representative of the requested records as a whole. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 499 (1988), 497 (1988). This open records letter does not reach, and therefore does not authorize the withholding of, any other requested records to the extent that those records contain substantially different types of information than that submitted to this office.

(a) Without limiting the amount or kind of information that is public information under this chapter, the following categories of information are public information and not excepted from required disclosure under this chapter unless they are expressly confidential under other law:

(1) a completed report, audit, evaluation, or investigation made of, for, or by a governmental body, except as provided by Section 552.108[.]

The submitted information consists entirely of completed reports, which are expressly public under section 552.022(a)(1). Thus, the department may only withhold these reports if they are excepted under section 552.108 of the Government Code or expressly confidential under other law. Although you argue that the submitted information is excepted under section 552.111 of the Government Code, section 552.111 is a discretionary exception and therefore is not "other law" for purposes of section 552.022.<sup>2</sup>

You also contend that the submitted information is confidential under section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code. Section 409 provides as follows:

Notwithstanding any other provision of law, reports, surveys, schedules, lists, or data compiled or collected for the purpose of identifying [sic] evaluating, or planning the safety enhancement of potential accident sites, hazardous roadway conditions, or railway-highway crossings, pursuant to sections 130, 144, and 152 of this title or for the purpose of developing any highway safety construction improvement project which may be implemented utilizing Federal-aid highway funds shall not be subject to discovery or admitted into evidence in a Federal or State court proceeding or considered for other purposes in any action for damages arising from any occurrence at a location mentioned or addressed in such reports, surveys, schedules, lists, or data.

23 U.S.C. § 409. Upon review of the submitted information, we agree that section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code applies to this information and constitutes other law for purposes of section 552.022(a) of the Government Code. *See In re City of Georgetown*, 53

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<sup>2</sup> Discretionary exceptions are intended to protect only the interests of the governmental body, as distinct from exceptions that are intended to protect information deemed confidential by law or the interests of third parties. *See, e.g.*, Open Records Decision Nos. 665 at 2 n.5 (2000) (discretionary exceptions in general), 630 at 4 (1994) (governmental body may waive attorney-client privilege, section 552.107(1)), 592 at 8 (1991) (governmental body may waive section 552.104, information relating to competition or bidding), 549 at 6 (1990) (governmental body may waive informer's privilege). Discretionary exceptions therefore do not constitute "other law" that makes information confidential.

S.W.3d 328 (Tex. 2001). Therefore, we conclude that the department must withhold the submitted reports under section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular records at issue in this request and limited to the facts as presented to us; therefore, this ruling must not be relied upon as a previous determination regarding any other records or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For example, governmental bodies are prohibited from asking the attorney general to reconsider this ruling. Gov't Code § 552.301(f). If the governmental body wants to challenge this ruling, the governmental body must appeal by filing suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such an appeal, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.353(b)(3), (c). If the governmental body does not appeal this ruling and the governmental body does not comply with it, then both the requestor and the attorney general have the right to file suit against the governmental body to enforce this ruling. *Id.* § 552.321(a).

If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the governmental body will do one of the following three things: 1) release the public records; 2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body's intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, then the requestor should report that failure to the attorney general's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at 877/673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Department of Public Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.--Austin 1992, no writ).

Please remember that under the Act the release of information triggers certain procedures for costs and charges to the requestor. If records are released in compliance with this ruling, be sure that all charges for the information are at or below the legal amounts. Questions or complaints about over-charging must be directed to Hadassah Schloss at the Texas Building and Procurement Commission at 512/475-2497.

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. We note that a third party may challenge this

ruling by filing suit seeking to withhold information from a requestor. Gov't Code § 552.325. Although there is no statutory deadline for contacting us, the attorney general prefers to receive any comments within 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,



Michael A. Pearle  
Assistant Attorney General  
Open Records Division

MAP/jh

Ref: ID# 165464

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Mr. Andrew R. Evans  
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(w/o enclosures)